THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Welcome the Child

September 28, 1997
John M. Buchanan

As we face a new century and a new millennium, the overarching challenge for America is to rebuild a sense of community and hope and civility and caring and safety for all our children. I hope God will guide our feet – and America's feet – to reclaim our nation's soul, and to give back to all of our children their sense of security and their ability to dream about and work toward a future that is attainable and hopeful. Let us begin by praying that God's Spirit will be born anew within and among us in our own family, our extended family, and in our community, private sector, and public life.

Marian Wright Edelman
President, Children's Defense Fund

FOURTH
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Mark 9:35-37
10:13-16

WELCOME THE CHILD

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,"
Mark 9:37

Begin

Do you ever find yourself feeling grateful that you have your growing up years behind you? That you made it safely through the perils and dangers of childhood and adolescence? Do you ever experience gratitude that you don't have to contend with the very specific and oftentimes lethal dangers which our youngsters confront every day of their lives?

I saw one of my oldest friends recently, a man I have known for nearly all my life. Our children are all grown and we were talking about how different their lives are from our own. In the course of the conversation, something came into focus for me that I hadn't thought of before and which we all had trouble believing, even though it was true about all of us. It was possible, I said, to grow up and graduate from high school in a small central Pennsylvania town without ever once encountering alcohol. It was such an astounding suggestion that it took us all awhile to assimilate but we agreed it was true. Some people were drinking at parties but not much. Most were not. Drugs were the stuff of remote myth. We never even saw any. Our only contact with addictive chemicals sounds like a *Leave It To Beaver* incident, a stolen pack of Chesterfields taken into the woods, distributed carefully and smoked with great determination and sophistication, one after the other, until they were gone. I don't recall that we ever needed to do it a second time.

Someone recently compiled a list comparing the top discipline and behavior problems occurring in the California public schools in 1940 and then in 1990.

The 1940s list:

1. Talking
2. Chewing gum
3. Making noise
4. Running in the halls
5. Getting out of turn in line
6. Wearing improper clothing
7. Not putting paper in wastebaskets

The 1990s list:

1. Drug and Alcohol abuse
2. Pregnancy
3. Rape
4. Robbery, assault and burglary
5. Arson
6. Vandalism
7. Gang warfare
8. Abortion
9. Venereal disease

You might conclude that never in history have childhood and adolescence been so treacherous as they are today and there is a sense in which that is true. On the other hand, 2,000 years ago in the Mediterranean world many infants never even made it to childhood because their parents simply abandoned them as newborns.

One time Jesus confronted and challenged that ethos and that brutal custom in a most dramatic way. He and his small band of friends were on their way walking from town to town in Galilee.

He was teaching in synagogues, healing the sick, encouraging the depressed and including into his own circle of association many of the people who were on the margins of his own society and his own religion. It was that inclusivity – his reaching across the societal and religious boundaries to affirm and include and, most provocatively, to eat with, the unclean, the sinners – that perplexed, distressed and then angered the guardians of public order and morality. They were beginning to follow him around, asking him difficult questions of morality and the law, trying to trip him up, discredit him, maybe even provoke him to say something blasphemous or seditious which could result in his arrest and crucifixion.

Now they were on the road again, back to Capernaum where Peter lived and Jesus apparently had a house, a home base. On the way, they argued. He could hear them, apparently. When they arrived, he asked, "What were you arguing about?" They were silent. They were embarrassed. He had been talking about the very real possibility of suffering, about self denial, about giving your life away and they were arguing about who among them was the greatest. It is one of the most human and most comic incidents in the whole story. He's talking about self denial and sacrifice and they're arguing about who's number one. And so, again, he sits down and uses the moment to teach. "The one among you who wants to be first must be the servant of all."

We've heard it a thousand times but it was, at the time, a stunning reversal of values. But then a strange thing happens. Jesus, I think, is distracted and changes the subject. He sees a child. I don't know how old the child was, but in my imagination I see a two-year-old, a toddler, that absolutely delightful age when children are never more beautiful, able to toddle about, reaching out to touch and feel and examine everything, willing to stop whatever they are doing and gaze intently, willing almost always to smile. You can't resist waving or smiling or patting. I see a two year old escapee from his mother, trundling through this very serious, very adult occasion, a group of men standing around, shuffling their feet, heads down, obviously feeling some discomfort and embarrassment, and in their midst, a man seated, looking at them intently, talking to them – all very serious adult business. And right though the middle of it all comes a toddler. The one teaching stops, maybe smiles, maybe greets the child and everything is now different. The subject changes. He picks the child up and says, "Whoever welcomes one such little one welcomes me."

(X) insert #1 written

Most of the comment on this incident tries to use his act of welcoming the child as an illustration of the point he was making about service. I don't think it's that at all. In fact, he will return later to the subject of service and status and the one who wants to be first becoming the servant of all. It's a great point. It comes up again in the next chapter and I'm going to preach on it next month. Today we simply have this wonderful interruption – this child and a very important new thing Jesus wants to say, apparently, about God's kingdom and the children.

#2 → Jewish culture valued children very highly. But the wider Greek-Roman culture in which Jewish culture lived often did not. John Dominic Crossan explains that there was a brutal and widespread custom in the Mediterranean world of "casting out," abandoning infants who were unwanted. You simply put the baby out and it died of exposure, or someone picked it up, raised it to be sold as a slave. There was a picture in the newspaper last week of a baby boy wrapped in a blanket, abandoned in the woods in China, where the custom continues. In fact, Crossan says it

was fairly widespread and it was based on the common assumption that a child was a non-entity, a non-person until its father accepted it as a member of the tribe or clan. If the father wanted a son, he simply didn't touch his daughter and she would be abandoned. Crossan even cites a letter written one year before the birth of Jesus from an Egyptian worker to his wife who was about to give birth. It's a chatty, loving letter and at the end the writer says, "If by chance you bear a son, let it be, if it is a girl, cast it out." [*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 62-63]

As the early Christian church moved into the Gentile cities of that world one of its distinguishing characteristics was the way it responded to this custom. Christians picked up the discarded babies. The idea of adoption – the later idea of orphanages for abandoned, abused or unwanted children – were Christian ideas, a Christian gift to the world.

In that environment and that world, what Jesus did by welcoming the child was dramatic, revolutionary. Crossan says that the act of touching, cradling, scooping that two-year-old toddler up into his strong arms and holding her – surely it was a little girl, just to punctuate the point – that act, Crossan says, was "the official bodily action of a father designating a newly-born infant for life rather than death, for accepting it into his family rather than casting it out into the garbage."

There is in this country a curious irony when it comes to Children. to #3 - 3/6/94 P3

to 3/6/94 P3 #3

I met a woman this summer who makes me uncomfortable because she suggests that our nation is essentially "casting out" its children and young people. What makes me uncomfortable is her suggestion that the religious community, Christians and Jews, have the responsibility of naming it and protecting the child and welcoming the child, just like Jesus did. Her name is Marian Wright Edelman. She is founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund. She is an unapologetic Christian. She came to Syracuse in June to address a pre-General Assembly meeting on the theme of Common Ground. Our children, their safety and well-being, is our Common Ground, Mrs. Edelman contends, and she makes a lot of people uncomfortable – including the President of the United States. In a now legendary incident, when she organized some poor people to testify to his committee, Dan Rostenkowski called her a "bully." Mrs. Edelman, a slight African-American woman, says quietly that she never remembers Rostenkowski saying that about the lobbyists for arms manufacturers or the savings and loan industry or the tobacco growers.

The mother of three, Mrs. Edelman is an uncompromising advocate for the well being of our children. She has written two books, *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours* and *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations on Loving and Working for Children.*

Mrs. Edelman doesn't pull any punches. In the introduction to her book of prayers she remembers how at Spelman and Morehouse Colleges young men and women were taught how to dress neatly and inexpensively, how to sit up straight, look people in the eye, speak clearly. Morehouse men, she recalls wistfully, "were counseled with humorous seriousness – to woo Spelman women by holding the door for them and getting up to give them their seats. What a contrast to the filthy, disrespectful and misogynistic lyrics of Snoop Doggy Dog and others who shamelessly dishonor our foremothers, grandmothers, sisters and daughters by referring to them as 'bitches' and worse." [p. xxiv]

That's easy, of course. That's somebody else. Mrs. Edelman makes me most uncomfortable when she talks about public policy, politics and how we spend our money as a moral or religious issue. She implies that how we deal with the children is everybody's business.

"Why," she asks, "is there still, in post-cold-war America, such unbearable dissonance between promise and performance ... between our capacity to prevent and alleviate child killing, poverty and disease and our political and spiritual will to do so." [*Prayers*, p. 86]

#4

"What is wrong with us." she asks, "when the morally unthinkable has become normal?" In the next four years:

- 1,000,000 babies will be born at low birth weight
- 143,000 will die before their first birthday
- 15,800 children under 19 will die by firearms
- 2,800 children younger than 5 will be killed
- 135,000 American youngsters take a gun to school every day.

We live beside and within it and it happens almost every day ... 14 times a day in America, a classroom of children killed every two days. It happens every few days here in Chicago. Last Saturday, Metro Section, *Chicago Tribune*, Maurice Young, 16 months old, pushed by his mother in his stroller, on the way to the grocery store at Chicago and Lawndale, caught in gang crossfire, dead with a bullet in his chest. Gun deaths are actually down a little this year, but they are still quite unlike anything anywhere else in the world.

And still we refuse to do much about it. It is, everyone agrees, a combination of factors over which we do have some control. Availability of hand guns, automatic weapons, accessibility of drugs and the absence of jobs, which makes the drug trade a lucrative entrepreneurial option for many city young people and provides the economic superstructure for gang culture.

to #5 written

#6

A few years ago the National Council of Catholic Bishops issued a report, Putting Children and Families First, which cited the unfortunate and unnecessary polarization in our thinking on this issue, as if it were a matter of either strong, autonomous families or government programs. The fact is, it is both. The fact is public policy either helps or hinders the maintenance of strong families. The fact is we know measures to take to give children a better chance and their families the opportunity to sustain them. Winston Churchill said, "There is no finer investment for any country than putting milk into babies." We know that one dollar invested in prenatal care for a poor mother results in a savings of three dollars later. We know that immunization prevents disease, that routine preventive medical care and basic nutrition have a dramatic effect not only in the physical health of children but also their mental capacity. We know that Head Start works – but still – it touches not even one half the children who need it or are eligible for it.

to #7 written

#8

What we need is the will, the spiritual courage, to do what we need to do now to save two generations of our children. Could we do it? Of course we can do it. We came up with $115 billion a few years ago to bail out the savings and loan industry.

One of the most important things Mrs. Edelman has to say is this: "Hope is one of the best contraceptives to teen pregnancy and one of the best antidotes to violence. Children need to have a sense of an achievable future in order to make good choices. They also need families, communities and a nation to protect them." [*Prayers*, p. 104]

This might be a matter of public policy or politics only if it weren't for what Jesus said about and did with that little child. I interpret his words and acts as a mandate for his followers. I think he meant it – that in his kingdom, in God's commonwealth, the children are safe and cared for.

So what if each of us who are able, each of us not currently engaged in the enormous responsibility of raising children, stood a little closer to those who are and simply said, "We're here to help in whatever way we can." And what if each of us took responsibility for a child who needs us. This church provides tutoring for 500 city youngsters. It's a wonderful program. It assists children with basic academic skills but just as important, it communicates something about a community's caring and that is a seed bed and source of hope and character. So if you never did it before, how about talking to Tea Akbar about tutoring. And if you can't do that, perhaps you'd like to take financial responsibility for the cost of a child in our Day Care Center. Day care is so critical. Welfare reform assures the ability to work and that means day care for children. We intend to serve families who need day care but can't afford it. We've got the program and we are beginning to help a few families, but we need more help. Or you might write a check to our new scholarship program that stands with older youngsters who need a little help and encouragement in getting to college. Or you might volunteer where you are by helping with scouts, teaching Sunday school, helping with our youth program, sports teams, youth clubs. Or write a letter every month, starting with school funding in Illinois, and moving to health care for children.

#9 ↓ to end

"If the child is safe, everyone is safe," someone wrote. Jesus picked up the child and held her in his arms and in that eloquent gesture conveyed the wonderfully inclusive and unconditional love of God. Children need to know that they are loved unconditionally. Mrs. Edelman's letter to her children includes 25 lessons for life, among them:

1. There is no free lunch.
5. Don't be afraid to take risks.
12. Never give up.
24. Be reliable, finish what you start.

And 25. Always remember that you are never alone. There is nothing you can do or say that can take away my or God's love. That's the key.

The loss of a parent is so very painful, regardless of our age because it is the loss, for many, of a source of unconditional love. Among the most precious blessings of my life was a father who never gave up, who worked hard, supported his family without fanfare, and a mother who stood beside him, an equal partner in making a home. They let me know about unconditional love. Even if that is not your experience, you know the importance and blessing of that miracle of grace.

And that is what Jesus, I think, meant to convey. The children are loved by him even though they have done nothing to earn his love. The children are loved unconditionally and so are we.

They needed to hear that. The people around him were working so hard at their religion – the scribes and Pharisees – making sure that the rules were all obeyed and that everyone knew his or her place. And the disciples were working so hard at the things adults work at – getting ahead, succeeding, being number one. Jesus himself is in the middle of teaching an important lesson and in the middle of it all comes a child and he stops, picks up the child and teaches the most important lesson of all, says the word we most need to hear, a word which is the good news, the redeeming, saving word of God's unconditional love.

In Morris West's novel, *The Clowns of God*, West portrays the return of Christ in which he holds a Down Syndrome child, serving her the bread and wine of communion, saying,

> "I gave this mite a gift I denied to all of you – eternal innocence. She will never offend me as all of you have done. She will never pervert of destroy the works of my father's hands. She is necessary to you. She will evoke the kindness that will keep you human. She will remind you every day that "I AM WHO I AM." [Diane M. Komp, *Theology Today*, "Hearts Untroubled," vol. 45, p. 273-279]

Amen.

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Dear God, we thank you for the reminder that all the children are your gift to us and that you have given us all the responsibility for their protection and care. And we thank you for the reminder of your love for each of us and that there is nothing we can do and nothing that can happen to us that can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.